

BOYANA CHURCH



BORINA

BULGARIAN CHURCHES AND MONASTERIES



The Life of St. Nicholas - Three Strategi Thank St. Nicholas - detail, fresco, 1259

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Boyana Church

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LOCATION AND HISTORY

The Boyana Church, a monument on the UNESCO List of World Cultural Heritage, is at the foot of Mount Vitosha, in one of Sofia's districts Boyana and in the midst of scenic parkland.

There was a castle Boyon (Boyanos) in the Middle Ages in the vicinity of where the church is. The name was first mentioned in the Byzantine chronicle of Scylitzes-Cedrenus in 1015. Sredets (today's Sofia) and Boyana were among the last forts to surrender to Byzantine rule when the uprising headed by Peter Delyan was suppressed in 1040/41. The author of "Strategikon" Cecaumenus described these events. In 1048

Boyana was mentioned again in the chronicle of Scylitzes-Cedrenus, which described the Pecheneg invasion and also in "Daniel's Interpretation", Old Bulgarian annals from the second half of the 11th century.

In the 19th century the church figured in the writings of Victor Grigorovich, a Russian Slavist, Stefan Verkovic, a Bosnian archaeologist, folklorist and ethnographer, and Konstatin Jirecek, a Czech historian. Prof. Andrei Grabar, an eminent archaeologist and art historian, wrote the first monograph on the Boyana Church.

Boyana Church - South facade



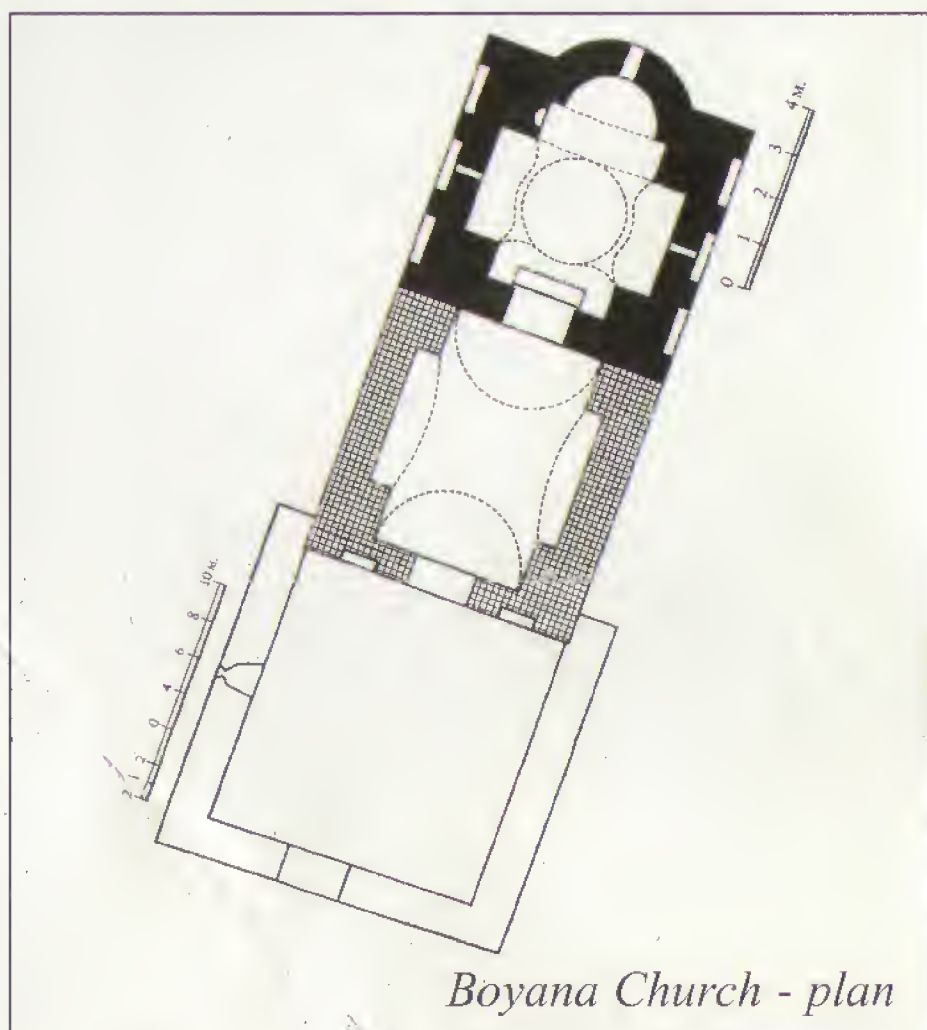
ARCHITECTURE

The history of the Boyana Church is divided into three stages of construction: stage one from late 10th and early 11th century; stage two in mid 13th century and stage three in mid 19th century. The eastern part of the church is a small one-apse cross of dome building with inbuilt buttresses that form an inscribed cross. The north and south facade decorations include three shallow niches of which the niche in the middle is higher, and the dogtooth that is a recurrent motif in monuments from the First Bulgarian Kingdom.

In the 13th century the sebastocrator Kaloyan and his wife Dessislava donated the

Boyana Church - entrance

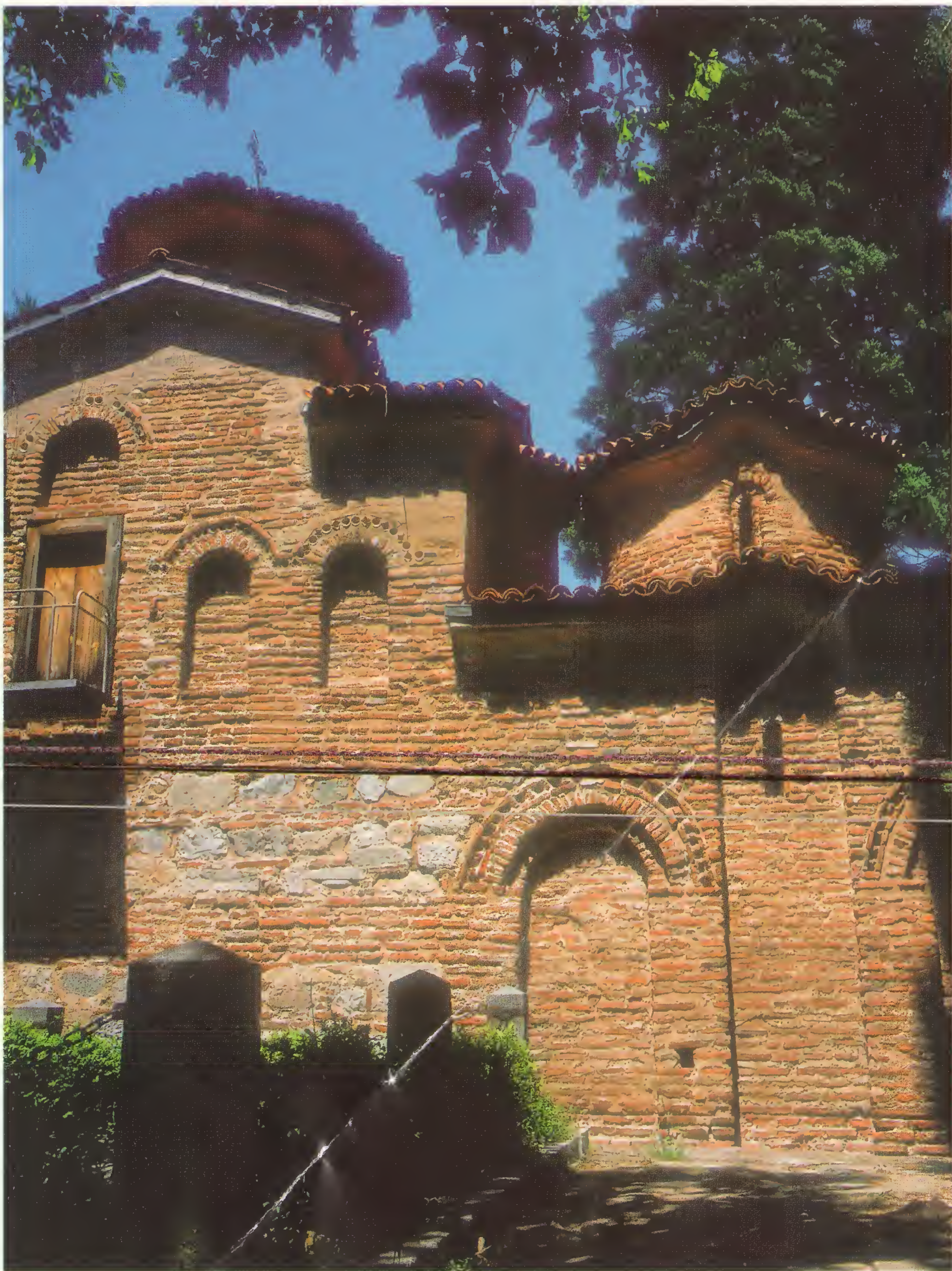
Boyana Church - West facade



Boyana Church - plan

*Boyana Church -
Part of the South facade*

BOYANA CHURCH



money to build the second two-level part of the church, which is of the two-level church-cum-tomb type. Tiles are characteristic of the facade decoration. The upper level repeats the architectural type of the original church; a semi-cylindrical vault covers the lower level; the northern and the southern walls contain two arcosolium niches.

The last part of the church was built with donations from the local people in mid 19th century.

FRESCOES

THE FIRST LAYER

The first layer of frescoes that stretched along the eastern part of the church dates from the 11th-12th century. Fragments can

be seen on the lower parts of the apse and on the northern walls, the upper parts of the western wall and on the western and southern vault.

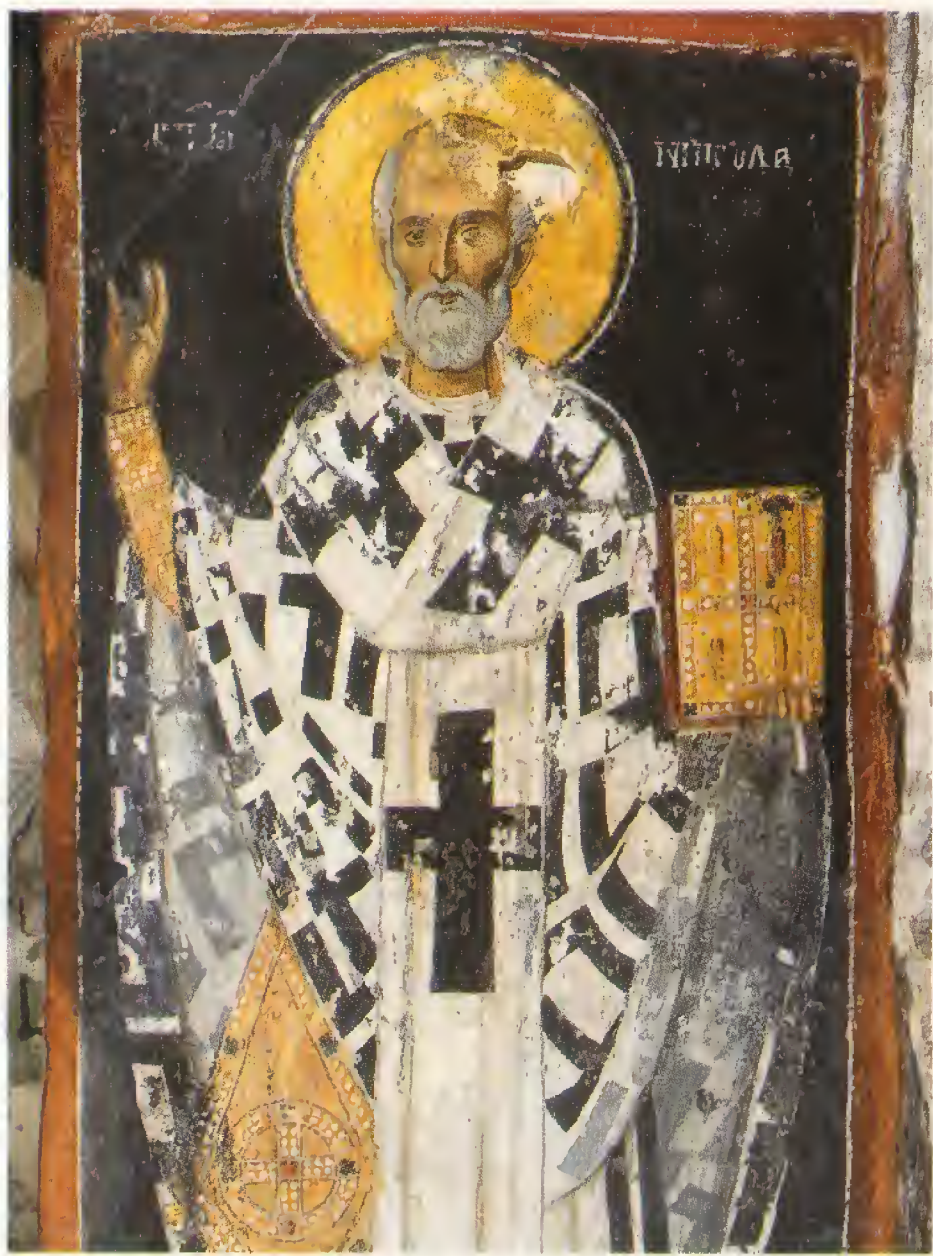
THE SECOND LAYER

The donors' inscription reads that in 1259 an anonymous painter painted over a new layer of frescoes and painted the two levels of the second part of the church.

The Boyana Church owes its world fame mostly to the frescoes from 1259 that reflect the amazing achievements of Bulgarian medieval culture. The painting sticks to the standard rules for Christian church decoration that the 7th Ecumenical Church Council

The Life of St. Nicholas - The Miracle in the Sea, fresco, 1259





St. Nicholas - detail, fresco, 1259



Christ Among the Doctors - detail, fresco, 1259

St. Catherine - detail, fresco, 1259

approved in Nicaea in 787 and that reigned supreme from the 11th century onwards. Each of the 240 depictions is distinguished for the sharp individualization, subtle psychological portrayal and vitality.

THE FIRST PART OF THE CHURCH

The dome in the first part of the church depicts the majestic Christ Ruler of the Universe (Pantocrator). Beneath the tambour is given to angels and the pendentives





King Konstantin Assen Tih - detail, fresco, 1259

to the four evangelists Mathew, Mark, Luke and John. The fronts of the arches depict the four images of Jesus Christ: Emmanuel, Older than the Days and the Ubrus and Keramion that are not made by human hands. The scenes that follow are devoted to the Great Church Feasts and to the Passion of Jesus Christ. The compositions are severe and laconic. The painter was preoccupied with the expression of the faces and with the feelings of the figures portrayed.

The plastic depiction of the archangel Gabriel on the left part of The Annunciation is very interesting for the impact of its harmonious proportions and classical beauty. The Crucifixion, The Descent into Hell, The Last Supper, The Entry into Jerusalem, The



King Konstantin Assen Tih and Queen Irina - detail, fresco, 1259

Transfiguration, The Ascension, The Dormition of Virgin Mary and others show how each of the characters feels the dramatic situation. The vivid face of Christ Evergetes is strongly impressive for the subtlety of portrayal.

The first tier features ten full-size warrior saints - Procopius, Nestorius, Demetrius, Theodore Tyron, Theodore Stratilates, the old warrior and others. The moneyless St. Damian and St. Cosmas and St. Constantine and St. Helen are among them. The altar conch depicts the Virgin and Child on a throne and amidst archangels. The four church fathers - St. Gregory the Theologian, Basil the Great, John Chrysostom, patriarch Germanus brought together in The



Queen Irina - detail, fresco, 1259

Melismos (The Veneration of the Offering) are under Virgin Mary. The two sides of the altar present the deacons Lawrence, Euplius and Stephen. St. Nicholas who is one of the patrons of the church is a very popular saint and the protector of sailors, merchants and bankers and many churches are dedicated to him.

THE NARTHEX

A total of 18 scenes in the narthex depict the life of St. Nicholas. The painter drew certain aspects of contemporary lifestyle. In The Miracle at Sea the ship and the sailors' hats recall the Venetian fleet. The men's feelings and the sea storm have been rendered very realistically.

The lunette over the narthex entrance depicts the Virgin and Child, St. Ann and St. Joachim and the Blessing Hand of the Lord. The lower parts of the walls feature St. Catherine, St. Marina, St. Theodore Studites and St. Pachomius. The southern arcosolium is given to the composition Christ among the Doctors and the northern arcosolium, to The Presentation of Virgin Mary to the Temple.

Two most revered Bulgarian saints John of Rila (this is the earliest extant portrait of the saint) and Paraskeva (Petka) are painted in the narthex. The hermit St. Ephraim Syriac whose all-seeing eyes illustrate the depth of his feelings is one of the monks depicted there. The saints Varvara and Nedelya are on either side of the entrance.

The full-size portraits of the donors, sebastocrator Kaloyn and his wife Dessislava, and of the Bulgarian King Konstantin Assen Tih and Queen Irina are most interesting. Kaloyn holds a model of the church and presents it to St. Nicholas. The face of Dessislava is subtly modeled and reveals her self-control and finesse. The four conscientiously painted portraits are among the earliest extant depictions of personages from history.

THE CHAPEL

The chapel on the second level keeps surviving fragments of frescoes. These are the church fathers, the Deesis (Supplication), The Ascension, The Annunciation, The Crucifixion, The Descent into Hell, an archangel, a young martyr and others. The Virgin Mary on The Ascension is amazingly



Jesus Christ Evergetes - detail, fresco, 1259

expressive and a remarkable achievement of contemporary church painting. The patron saint Panteleimon was probably depicted in the 14th century.

The painter is still anonymous. The Boyana Master stands for the team that decorated the church and that was trained in the studios of the Turnovo Art School. The frescoes have exceptional artistic merits and perfect technique of execution, profundity of thought and elaborateness, realism and subtlety. They were painted by an excellent artist. The Boyana Church is the only completely conserved monument in terms of architecture and painting and an example from the Turnovo Art School from the period in question. The painter



The Annunciation - detail, The Archangel Gabriel, fresco, 1259

has painted a whole galaxy of illustrious contemporaries.

The world-famous Boyana Church frescoes had a certain impact on the evolution of medieval Bulgarian and European painting. To quote prof. A. Grabar: "Boyana is the most valuable contribution to medieval art."

The Descent into Hell - detail, fresco, 1259





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